

The Tiger-breed families.

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Among the peasant population of Jempul, a settlement of Malay villagers along a river of that name in the Kuala Pilah District of negri Sembilan, there is a belief that certain families in the local tribe (*suku*) of *Tiga Batu* have a mysterious connection with tigers. Report has it that this belief is not peculiar to Jempul, but extends over a wide area in the Nine States—Juasseh, Rembau, Tampin, Terachi, Gunong Pasir, Jelebu and Pantai. The writer however has not made a study of the belief in all these places, and this paper deals only with Jempul. For want of a better term I call the families in question “The tiger-breed families.”

The belief is that members of the particular families become tigers *after their death*; a man becomes a tiger, and a woman a tigress. Thus, though the belief recalls the were-tiger and were-wolf stories which are widely known and believed in many parts of the world, it is not exactly the same: the one belief supposes the transformation to take place at will during life, and the other that it takes place only after death. In their life-time as human beings members of these families are said to be peculiarly related with certain tigers of the forest, whom they vaguely recognise as incarnations of dead relatives. These tiger “relatives” sometimes come to the compounds of their human kinsmen, protect their cattle from the attack of foreign tigers, their poultry from civet-cats (*musang*) and their paddy-fields or tapioca plantations from the ravages of wild-boars. The visitors are expected especially during the nights of Hari Raya, or when there is grave trouble in the family to which they belong. But it is seldom that many come together. Usually one or two represent the clan. Often a man will warn a friend belonging to one of these families, not to make mischief when he becomes a tiger. “When your turn comes to become a tiger” (*i.e.* when you die) he will say, “I trust you will still remain a friend to me, and not do me or my folk and cattle any harm. Otherwise I will shoot you. If you require food, you are free to hunt your own fellows in the jungle. Why harm our human kind?” Sometimes such words are spoken jestingly, but more often in a tone of deadly earnestness.

All this sounds as absurd as it is interesting. But all the villagers living within circumference of the families tell the same tale. They say that when a member of one of these families is ill, there is always one tiger at least haunting the neighbourhood of the patient's house (as though there had been telepathic communication between the two). He comes closer and closer as night approaches, and at such a time nobody dares to go out of the house unaccompanied. The compound of the Malay villager's house is

usually surrounded with scrub and patches of low-lying shrubs: it is in these that the tiger has his hiding place during those anxious moments of the patient's illness. If the illness is serious, or the patient is dying, the tiger will show signs of trouble and uneasiness. He groans, makes piteous noises and restlessly moves from one end of the compound to the other. Occasionally in his seeming anxiety for the patient's condition, he encounters the human visitors who pass with their torches to or from the patient's house. But he is harmless, though the people have their hearts in their mouths. The dying patient in the house seems no longer conscious of his or her identity as a human being. He tosses about, grinds his teeth and looks wild, manifesting a hundred and one of the characteristics of a tiger, trying to force out a tail (*měng-hějan ekor*) from the coccyx, and often giving unmistakable responses to the signals from his tiger-friend below. Very often more than one tiger will come and make circuits round the house. With the first peep of day the inmates of the jungle betake themselves to the nearest bushes, showing themselves at times, and making their presence felt all through the day. The following night brings them back to their sentinel routine. But they are not to be harmed nor do they do any harm. The patient breathes his last and then all is silent till the burial is over.

In ordinary cases the prospective tiger dies peacefully, and then becomes a tiger. No one has ever cared or dared to go and watch what really happens at the grave during the few nights following the burial. They say that some days after the burial, the white shroud (*kain kápan*) of the buried body is found lying besides the grave, torn and tattered: and a hole of the size of a man's body is found to have been made into the grave, while the foot-prints of tigers are seen everywhere. From this it is concluded that the tigers must take the corpse and bear it (*usong*) into the forest where the metamorphosis takes place in some inexplicable way. A tiger representing the dead person makes his appearance shortly afterwards. Even if the person dies in another country, he comes home to his native village in the shape of a tiger, and announces his arrival through a dream to the principal member of the family. Soon after the announcement, a new tiger appears in the neighbourhood. There are characteristic marks on the tiger answering to the marks on the person when alive as a man. If the person had a deformed leg, the new tiger also has a deformed leg. If the person was bald-headed, the tiger also is bald-headed. He is also distinguishable as the personification of such and such a member of the family by peculiar gait and bearing or general build which are those of the dead person. These tigers understand and respond when called by their human names. I cannot illustrate this better than by a personal story. One night, many years ago, my grand-mother was troubled by a herd of buffaloes breaking again and again into her poorly-fenced compound where vegetables and young fruit-trees were sprouting. The moon was overcast, and the night was cool and calm. Repeatedly the old lady

drove the intruders away, but as repeatedly they returned. It happened that she had an old friend named Faseh who had died about a year before and was believed to have become a tiger. In her impatience, the old lady shouted out: "O Faseh, my friend! If you really have become a tiger, please do me the favour of driving away these nasty buffaloes, and thus save my little garden from being destroyed." A few moments passed. Then all of a sudden, the buffaloes bellowed and rushed out of the compound helter-skelter for their life; while above the confusion rose the terrible roar of an angry tiger. We were panic-stricken in the little hovel where we lived, and the old lady felt sorry for having called the tiger. But for the rest of the night and for many nights afterwards the buffaloes never returned.

Another incident of a different nature illustrates the superstition. A Malay woman named Ba'idah, belonging to one of these tiger-breed families, had a dead brother, believed to have turned into a tiger. One night she dreamt that this brother in the shape of a man returned home from a long journey, very badly wounded in his chest by an accidental shot from a spring-gun (*bēlantek-usa*). He came up the verandah (*sērambi*) and there lay groaning with agony and saying he was going to die. When she woke up in the morning she told her husband what she had seen in her dream. On opening the door leading from the main room to the verandah they found that all the verandah was besmeared with fresh blood. They suspected this was the blood of the wounded brother who had come home in the woman's dream. It seemed that the tiger had left the house only a short while ago. Calling their neighbours who came with guns and spears, they followed the track of the blood and foot-prints into the forest. They did not go far when they came upon the carcase of a huge tiger. The distinctive marks they found on the carcase assured them that it was indeed the woman's brother. The mortal wound was exactly in the chest, and appeared to have been inflicted the very same night. Many similar incidents are known throughout Jempul. Time and again it is related these family-tigers visit their relatives' houses during the nights of holy festivities, such as Hari Raya. Sometimes they manage to make their way into the kitchen, and feast over some *rēbus kērbau* or *ikan pindang* that may have been left on the hearth. Morning comes to tell the tale from the traces they leave behind and the clean-licked cooking pots and dishes. This would make an interesting counterpart to the well-known nursery tale of Santa Claus who comes on Christmas eve to bring presents for children.

There are many little graveyards throughout Jempul which are credited with having produced tigers out of human corpses. Two of them deserve special mention, and these are *Kubor Nesan* and *Kubor Lēban*, situated in Kampong Tengah. These two are among many which have become highly revered by the ignorant masses. They pay their vows (*niat*) there, and propitiate the spirit of the place.

They say that all the tigers springing from these graves are saints (*Harimau Kĕramat*) under the more saintly lordship of the great *Dato Paroï* whose abode is Gunong Angsi, as opposed to Gunong Ledang which has its own army of tiger-warriors and settlers. Fancy and superstition have associated endless tales and legends with these two leading personalities—the *Dato Paroï* and *Dato Gunong Ledang*. Of them as of a few other tiger-tales I propose to speak in some future article.

Belief in were-tigers whose transformation takes place during life, is general all over the Peninsula. But, as a rule, the power is ascribed to people of the Korinchi tribe from Sumatra. The possession of the power by a person is said to be indicated by the absence of the furrow (*alor*) which ordinary men have on their upper lip immediately below the nose. Tigers of this sort are called *harimau chĕnakū*, or *harimau jadi-jadian*. They change back into man just as the man changes into tiger. Sir Hugh Clifford in his book “The Further Side of Silence” relates a case of a Malay were-tiger.

